

The struggle against apartheid

The 1980s saw a period of heightened political turmoil during which time the democratic trade union movement played a central role in opposing the apartheid state. Bannings, which began in the 1960s, continued into the 80s, especially after the implementation of the state of emergency. Trade unionists were arrested, detained, tortured – and even killed, as was the case with activist and trade unionist Neil Aggett and one of the driving forces behind the Labour Bulletin Rick Turner.

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1984-1990

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Sociology professor and long time board member Eddie Webster provides a very personal account of his initial meeting with Turner and how instrumental he was in the formation of the Bulletin (see p34) which was subjected to some harassment from the security branch. As political mobilisation intensified, a decision was taken in 1981 to begin a process of unity talks within the emerging labour movement (see p36). Just as the unity talks were progressing, the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed on 20 August, 1983 in Mitchell's Plain, Cape Town. It was formed as a broad alliance of various community, worker, student, women, religious and other organisations. In the midst of unity talks, the UDF was borne. Various union groupings decided to join the UDF, but others including the General Workers Union (GWU), Federation of SA Trade Unions (Fosatu), Food and Canning/African Food and Canning Workers Union decided to remain unaffiliated.

The UDF's national publicity secretary Terror Lekota (who had previously been an organiser for the GWU) argued why unions

should join the UDF: 'The struggle of the working class does not end at the factory floor... Unions must take up community struggles if they are to represent the interests of workers'. The unions, which decided not to affiliate, reiterated their support for all 'progressive' organisations. The GWU said they were busy with the formation of the new union federation, which was a top priority. The federation would give the workers greater unity and strength and enable them to play a greater part in political issues. 'This is not to say we reject the UDF. We wholeheartedly support any organisation which is progressive and democratic and we are prepared to cooperate with them.'

In the November 1983 edition of the Labour Bulletin a number of unions responded to the formation of the UDF and the role of unions in the struggle and their relationship with political parties. An edited version of the interview with the GWU general secretary Dave Lewis (p39) raises some rather provocative issues around the relationship between unions and other broad based organisations and could be pertinent

in relation to the current debate between the labour movement and the new social movements. Sisa Njikelana responds to the views put forward by the GWU, see p40.

These debates brought to the fore existing divisions and differences around the relationship between unions and politics.

There were ongoing running debates in the Bulletin about the merits or otherwise of workerists vs populists.

Isizwe, (the nation), the journal of the UDF launched a rather critical attack (see page 42) on the so-called 'workerists' who were seen to be mainly a group of white intellectuals who became involved in the labour movement in the 1970s. Over the years there were numerous challenges against the role of white intellectuals and academics in the emerging union movement. It did not begin and end with the workerists/populist debate. This issue continues to be raised even today within union circles.

This unity process led to the formation of Cosatu in December 1985. The formation of Cosatu spurred other unions to explore merger talks. On 1 May 1986 saw the

SPLIT IN MAWU

While unity was being discussed at a national level, 'the independent labour movement has been seriously weakened by the number of splits that have occurred within its ranks', Mark Swilling pointed out in an article published in SA Labour Bulletin 10 (1). Workers, he said, in Mwasa, Saawu, Ccawusa and Mawu had been divided and split into competing factions. He explored the split in Mawu in the context of the emergence of shop steward councils and the development of trade union organisation on the East Rand. Swilling outlined the organisation of metalworkers on the East Rand. In the aftermath of the Scaw Metal strike some organisational weaknesses emerged in Mawu. '...a large number of strikes had been lost when workers decided unilaterally, without consulting the shop stewards council or the union, to go on strike. Mawu had been unable to keep up with the pace set in the strike waves...'

The start of disunity began with differences in approach between different union officials, issues around worker control and claims and counterclaims of individuals

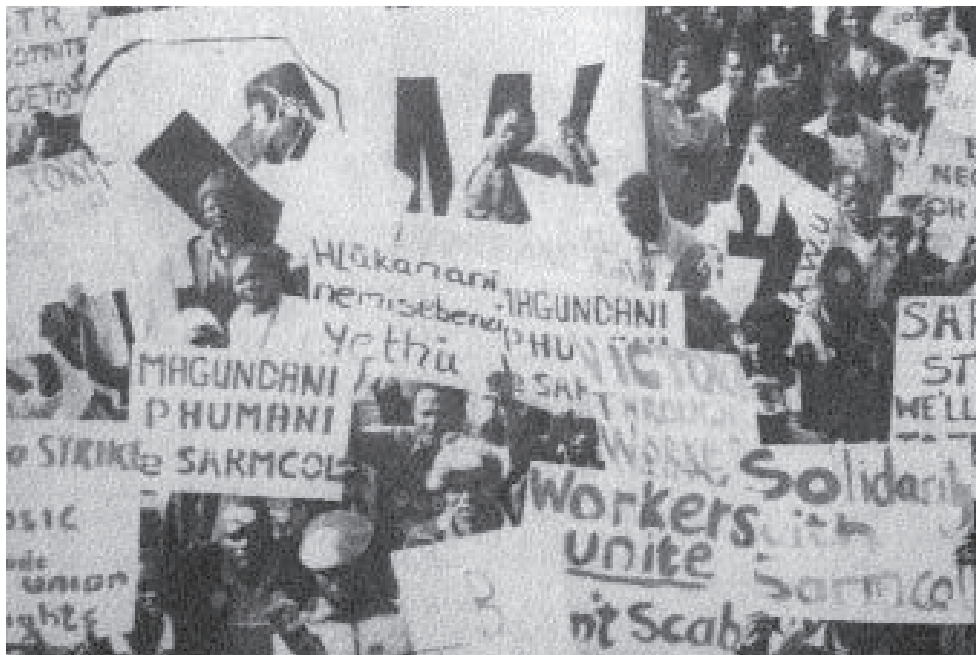
building their own power bases. The situation culminated in allegations of financial mismanagement which were fobbed off as being part of an attempt by 'white bureaucratic elite' to discredit one of the individuals. Those who decided to breakaway argued that the union was becoming too bureaucratic and worker control not being implemented.

The Mawu position on the group that broke away included claims of corruption, racism among others. Swilling concluded that: 'the process of building unions and working class organisations based on the principle of workers' control is probably the most difficult and complex task that faces workers... The degree of worker control in a particular union depends on the form of leadership, its willingness to combat reliance upon expertise on the one hand and the capacity of the rank-and-file to generate their own organisational and strategic resources to take control of the union on the other... Given that this struggle against undemocratic tendencies exists in all unions, it follows that splitting a union compounds the problem instead of solving it.'

DEMOCRACY IN FAWU

The emerging labour movement was yet again forced to deal with issues around the union democracy and divisions when problems resurfaced in the Food and Allied Workers Union (Fawu) in 1990. The Labour Bulletin covered the conflict in the Cape Town branch extensively. Divisions emerged when a number of officials were expelled from the branch in May 1990 but conflict had emerged previously. Those expelled formed part of a group called the 'campaign for democracy in Fawu'. This grouping raised issues around tolerance of different political views and the way the group was ousted.

The former Fawu general secretary Jan Theron raised some pertinent issues in his assessment of the developments within the union. He raised issues around unity, worker control and democracy and questions around power and the role played by union leadership. 'Leadership will always claim to act for the highest motives. They are not in it for themselves, but for the workers they represent. But what is to stop leadership pursuing its own interests in power?'



formation of the United Workers Union of SA in Durban under the auspice of Inkatha. The union stated from the outset that it would support the political aspirations of the Inkatha movement. A few months later in December 1986, Cusa and Azactu merged into Nactu. While these predominantly black unions were merging, the traditional craft unions faced some difficulty leading to the collapse of TUCSA. TUCSA president Robbie Botha said the organisation's problems stemmed from the growing politicisation of the shopfloor and the fierce rivalry with the emerging unions and increasing polarisation between racial groupings with the council. TUCSA's non-political stance was seen to be a result of the increasing influence of the conservative unions in the council. TUCSA had comprised three groupings: the more skilled craft unions (mainly in motor and metal), less skilled industrial unions (clothing and textile) and the white-collar unions and professional associations.

Strikes continued to be a feature during this period in both the private and public sector, which had until this period not been affected by major strikes. The majority of these strikes were around recognition and over wages. It was during this period that strikes and other forms of industrial action reached a peak. There were the famous Sarmcol strike in 1985, the 1987 mineworkers and railway strikes and the numerous retail strikes.

While strike action continued, as did political stayaways (the 1986 stayaway against the detention of Numsa general secretary Moses Mayekiso), the unions, especially those in the Cosatu fold, became embroiled in the charter debate. This raged

on for some time and created divisions in unions such as Ccawusa (now known as Saccawu) as some members opposed the adoption of the Freedom Charter. Some would argue that it was during this period that the ANC waged a strong battle to stamp its political authority on Cosatu.

After the adoption of the Freedom Charter at Cosatu's second national congress in 1987, Chris Dlamini (vice-president) said: 'this move showed clearly that Cosatu has an alliance with progressive organisations in the community and that Cosatu is a part of the mass democratic movement struggling for freedom in the country.'

In the aftermath of the adoption of the Charter a special congress was held in May 1988 where unions agreed to mobilise in opposition to proposed changes to the Labour Relations Act in 1988. This sparked off countrywide action by the unions, which eventually led to Cosatu calling for a workers' summit in 1989, and subsequent collaboration between employers and unions leading to the adoption of the 'Saccola accord'. The Saccola process saw the emergence of a more cooperative model, which by 1992 was viewed, as a 'new era' of cooperation in labour relations.

This new spirit of co-determination and moves towards national level bargaining (which in some sectors was being challenged by employers, as was the case in printing) was of no concern to workers at Mercedes Benz. In 1990 workers went on strike demanding that Mercedes management withdraw from the national bargaining forum (NBF). The strike and subsequent action caused major shockwaves

NUM STRIKE

During the National Union of Mineworkers' national congress ahead of the 1987 strike, the unions' president James Motlatsi (now on the board of AngloGold/Asanti) set the scene for what was to emerge: 'Under capitalism we will never find a solution to our problems. It is only with a democratic socialist SA that the working class and all the oppressed people will have the wealth which they produce under their control.'

throughout the union, political organisations in the Eastern Cape and industrial relations circles. The NBF had only got going the year before, following pressure from the union.

As the decade drew to a close it became clear that political negotiations leading to the collapse of the apartheid regime would become a reality. This forced the traditional alliance partners to explore the nature of the society they wanted to have in place in a post-apartheid SA. The situation became more complicated following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The publication by SA Communist Party general secretary Joe Slovo in 1990 of his now famous article, 'Has Socialism Failed?' elicited some lengthy debates around socialism, how democratic it was, the new role of the party and the relationship between the party and the labour movement. Sociology lecturer **Devan Pillay** explored the relationship between the party and Cosatu, see p44. His input also informs the 'two hats' debate, which is discussed in the next section, and the ongoing workerist/populist debate. Lb